

WorldatWork is a nonprofit human resources association focused on compensation, benefits, work-life effectiveness and total rewards – strategies to attract, motivate and retain an engaged and productive workforce. It is a large association with over 65,000 members.

A few weeks ago, WorldatWork released its “2013 Trends in Employee Recognition” report. I found the report particularly interesting, because employee recognition had been a central discussion during a recent Committee of the Whole meeting.

At Committee of the Whole, a discussion about the changes in collective bargaining due to Acts 10 and 32 led to an acknowledgment that we need to be sensitive to the personal impacts. How we proceed will affect our relationships for a long time. City Council members and department heads discussed being an employer of choice, attracting and keeping the right people. The key to keeping good staff (and by and large we have very good staff) is empowerment so they can do their jobs correctly, feel part of a team rather than worker bees, and not just be taken for granted.

The WorldatWork report summarized the results of its February 2013 member survey to measure employee recognition programs and the impact on the workforce. It noted, “Specific applications may change as the environment, economy and labor markets shift, but new data suggest that even with a recession...recognition programs remain an important variable in the total rewards equation.”

Among the statistics reported by WorldatWork was that 88% of organizations have recognition programs in place, 70% have both formal and informal recognition programs, and 49% indicated there was not a written strategy behind their recognition programs.

In Evansville, we encourage individual recognition in the way of praise or thanks, typically by peers or supervisors. Such appreciation may well be the foundation of any successful recognition program. But in our case it is largely happenstance, not a formalized program.

The EMS department has given pins to its employees recognizing years of service. Some retiring employees – typically department heads or long time employees – have been given City Council resolutions or Mayoral proclamations in appreciation of their work. Employees have independently organized farewell receptions after work for their retiring or departing peers.

Our formal recognition has been pretty much limited to a longevity bonus after 20 years in most of our employee contracts. Indeed, the WorldatWork survey found the number one goal for a recognition program was to recognize years of service.

Rounding out the top three goals for recognition programs were creating a positive work environment and creating a culture of recognition. These are very much in line with our recent Committee of the Whole discussion. In the wake of Acts 10 and 32, the city wants to make sure it respects its employees and values their contributions.

An interesting point in the survey was in the fourth and fifth place goals: motivating high performance and reinforcing desired behaviors. The survey noted these may be evidence of an emerging trend toward recognition programs to drive specific behaviors and results. Done well,

a recognition program communicates the right behaviors, rewards and reinforces those behaviors, and validates employee contributions. This is very much in line with the strategic discussions we have had over the last two years about driving for excellence and providing top-notch service.

So the survey notes a nuanced duality in recognition programs. On the one hand, they are geared toward praise and respect for employees for who they are, not just what they do. And on the other hand, recognition programs are geared toward performance and contribution. The key is balancing the need to recognize both the achievement and the person behind the achievement.

Acts 10 and 32 caused a deep erosion of workplace trust. It will be difficult (but necessary) to regain that trust. I expect we will be establishing a more formal and strategic recognition program than we've had in the past.

In part, it means setting a work environment with attention to intrinsic motivators. To varying degrees, autonomy, achievement and affiliation drive all of us.

Autonomy is being self-directed in our work. The task itself or some parameters (such as a specific deadline) may be set, but it is important to have the freedom to determine the technique to complete the task. This freedom is central to self-motivation. And it is also key to innovating and improving our work practices.

Achievement is accomplishing the task. Frequently, it is also growing within the job and taking on new areas of responsibility. It is important to be challenged and then succeed.

Affiliation is a sense of belonging or a sense of purpose. This should be fairly easy in the public sector, since the work itself is service work. And when it is done well, the public benefits. The city provides essential goods and services.

A work environment tuned to intrinsic motivation should be intertwined with a culture of recognition. To be effective, recognition needs to be immediate, genuine, specific, and individualized. This means having recognition built into our social architecture through our day-to-day practices, making recognition a habit. This needs to be at all levels, involving all of the City Council, department heads, and employees, but it is most important for recognition to come from supervisors.

An employee picnic, pins or certificates, or other traditional recognition program may be part of a culture of recognition and appreciation. But it is the thought behind the award that counts.

All of these aspects – the work environment, the culture of recognition, and the formal measures of accomplishment – need to be aligned with the city's goals of driving for excellence and providing top-notch service. An effective and strategic recognition program is more than something nice to have; it is a hallmark of a high performing organization.